



PRESS RELEASE

Recreational Fishing Alliance

5724 N. Route 9, New Gretna, NJ 08224

P: 888-564-6732 F: 609-294-3812

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Contact: Jim Hutchinson, Jr.

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888 564-6732

RFA SUPPORTS "POTS OFF REEFS" BILLS Removing Fixed Gear From Artificial Reefs Part of a Larger Problem

New Jersey legislation which would prohibit the use of fixed gear within 100 feet of artificial reefs created by the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and their Division of Fish and Wildlife (Division) has successfully moved out of the Senate in a vote of 31-4. The Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) has supported "Pots Off Reef" legislation since originally introduced back in 2007, and continues to support those legislative efforts to protect the access rights of recreational anglers along New Jersey's artificial reef complex.

"We support getting the pots off the artificial reefs, we've never wavered in that view," said RFA executive director, Jim Donofrio, who explained that submerged trap lines and high fliers have adversely impacted access for all users. "This is definitely an access issue, and on that point the RFA supports both the senate bill (S221) and the assembly companion (A1152), as we always have," he said.

While RFA says the legislation would effectively eliminate gear conflicts on the state's artificial reefs and help improve recreational access, the organization has also warned of a bigger conservation issue that needs to be addressed. Since 2006, RFA has been bringing attention to the unmanaged commercial pot/trap fishery that has existed in New Jersey for many years, an issue they claim impacts not only the fishermen but the fish themselves.

"What we really want to know is just how many traps are out there to begin with, and that's an answer we're not getting," Donofrio said. "Other groups now starting to get involved in state fisheries are unaware of the history as it relates to species like blackfish and sea bass, and they've been quick to blame legislators when the state has had the power for many years to pass regulations consistent with the New Jersey Reef Plan that would prohibit all pots and traps from the reefs."

RFA believes that in addition to angler access, unaccounted fish traps present a serious conservation issue that must be also addressed, something Donofrio says "we've been requesting since long before these reef bills were introduced." In March of 2006, he sent an official welcome letter to then-incoming Division Director Dave Chanda, in which RFA brought attention to problems with the tautog (blackfish) stock along the coast.

"Discussions with NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife have indicated that the state does not have the adequate information to separate the percentage of blackfish directed fishing effort from all fish pot license holders," Donofrio wrote in 2006. "We encourage the state to determine the current number of legitimate pot fishermen targeting blackfish and the number of pots being fished. From this information, pot tags can be issued to ensure that all gear is removed during closures."

"Furthermore, we urge the state to require removal of all pots and enforce a no-sale/no-possession provision from June 1 through November 14. This will allow law enforcement to determine illegal points of sale such as restaurants and markets," he added.

RFA says the illegal and unreported landings and sale of tautog have been a persistent problem and perhaps the biggest driver of that stock's decline over the years, and the group has encouraged coastal states to address the seriousness of the issue with increased enforcement to address poaching issues and a stronger management state-by-state management plan to address fish pots and traps.

RFA's 2006 letter to division director Chanda also set a June 1, 2006 cutoff date for the state to initiate response or action, at which time Donofrio said "we will pursue stronger measures through the legislature." RFA is continuing to work with key coastal legislators on drafting language which will address both access and conservation issues related to coastal fisheries management in New Jersey, and they're hoping that more tie-in from the coastal community can help put

"Every angler in New Jersey realizes that the current legislation does not have the support of New Jersey's commercial fishing community, which is why this pots bill has become such a political football in Trenton," said RFA-NJ chapter chairman, Adam Nowalsky. "Obviously, the commercial and recreational sector is not in agreement on getting pots off the reef, but the point we do all agree on is that the accountability issue with undocumented fish traps soaking in our coastal waters 365 days a year." An Atlantic County resident and charter boat captain, Nowalsky is also legislative proxy for New Jersey at the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC).

According to Capt. Tony Bogan of the United Boatmen, the access and conservation issues surrounding New Jersey's pot management problem have been debated for years. "We've been pushing this issue at the state level for over a decade and have made countless recommendations on how to address the seriousness of the live market problem," he said. Bogan, who also represented the state of New Jersey as representative at the Mid Atlantic Fishery Management Council from 2003-2006, said the simple act of removing pots from the state reefs is part of a much bigger state issue.

"We have no idea how many pots are out there, but instead of addressing the serious management problem, individuals are allowing state legislators to battle over a bill that will essentially just spread illegal pots out over a bigger area," Bogan said. "Moving conflict from one place to another will not address the most serious fisheries issue we have on our reef fish."

RFA continues to support efforts to get all fixed gear off New Jersey's artificial reef complex, both along inshore state waters and outside the 3-mile limit in federal waters, but without a true management plan to follow, RFA believes the current legislation is mostly symbolic. "A simple executive order from the Governor can get those pots off the reef next week, and when you look at the final reef program, the DEP has the legal means to comply," Donofrio said.

"We've done our due diligence on this legislation, and RFA is going to have to ask our legislators for more help in dealing with both access and conservation issues along the coast," Donofrio said.

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The Recreational Fishing Alliance is a national, grassroots political action organization representing recreational fishermen and the recreational fishing industry on marine fisheries issues. RFA's Mission is to safeguard the rights of saltwater anglers, protect marine, boat and tackle industry jobs, and ensure the long-term sustainability of our Nation's saltwater fisheries. For more information, call 888-JOIN-RFA or visit www.joinrfa.org.